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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 002480

SIPDIS

STATE FOR U/S HUGHES, R
STATE FOR WHA A/S SHANNON, WHA/PPC, AND WHA/CEN
STATE FOR EB, OES, PRM, AND INL/LP
NSC FOR DAN FISK
STATE PASS USTR
STATE PASS AID FOR LAC/CAM

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SUBJECT: WASHINGTON COMES TO HONDURAS: U/S HUGHES AND WHA

A/S SHANNON MEET WITH PRESIDENT-ELECT ZELAYA

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 2461 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Charles A. Ford;
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (SBU) Summary: In his first official meeting with a senior foreign official since winning the Honduran presidency, President-elect Jose Manuel "Mel" Zelaya Rosales met with U/S Karen Hughes on December 7 in San Pedro Sula. The cordial half-hour meeting included WHA A/S Tom Shannon and the Ambassador, as well as members of Zelaya's senior staff. Both Hughes and Zelaya affirmed their mutual interest in maintaining close, friendly bilateral relations. Zelaya's team took the opportunity to raise certain key issues: deforestation, CAFTA, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), anti-narcotics, and the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program. End Summary.

Hughes Meets Zelaya

¶12. (SBU) Following a morning meeting with Honduran President Ricardo Maduro and a subsequent helicopter visit to flood affected regions of northern Honduras, U/S Hughes engaged President-elect Jose Manuel "Mel" Zelaya Rosales in a friendly meeting at the San Pedro Sula airport. Zelaya, who had only been informed of the possible meeting with Hughes the previous day, brought much of his senior leadership with him to the northern city. In attendance were future ministers Yani Rosenthal (Presidency) and Hugo Noe Pino (Finance), Chief of Staff Roberto Babun, Advisor to the Presidential Palace Moises Starkman, and Private Secretary Raul Valladares. In addition to WHA A/S Shannon and the Ambassador, U/S Hughes was accompanied by Mr. Robert Lane of John Deere and Company. While Zelaya is not known for his punctuality, it is interesting to note that he arrived 45 minutes early for his meeting.

Deforestation/Natural Disasters

¶13. (SBU) Perhaps in recognition of U/S Hughes' mission to encourage private sector involvement with disaster relief in the region, Zelaya focused his initial remarks on what he termed "ecological vulnerabilities" in Honduras. Zelaya confirmed that recent storms and floods had accelerated deforestation in the country. He called for more attention to irrigation projects and the dredging of canals to help protect forestry from flooding. Subsequently, Rosenthal proposed spending Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) money on flood prevention and protection. He further stressed the importance of strengthening levees and constructing new dams to both protect the environment and generate electricity.

¶14. (SBU) Referring to U.S. experience with managing forests and developing irrigation systems, Hughes suggested the possibility that the U.S. could offer expertise in both areas. Hughes noted the enduring bilateral ties between the peoples and governments of the two countries and assured Zelaya that this relationship would continue. The Ambassador mentioned pending Honduran legislation on forestry issues and agreed that this is an area of mutual concern that the two countries could address together. The Ambassador further endorsed the role that the private sector in both countries can play in protecting the environment against natural disasters.

CAFTA

¶15. (SBU) Zelaya voiced his personal support for CAFTA and pledged to work for passage of implementing legislation during the legislative session which ends in mid-December. Rosenthal expressed optimism that CAFTA could launch in January with Honduras' participation. Zelaya remarked that,

under CAFTA, Honduras would have to guarantee international investments under clear, transparent rules. He identified tourism and energy development as huge areas for investment. Noe Pino added that the government placed high priority on assisting the medium and small business person, especially the farmer, under CAFTA. Hughes looked forward to implementing CAFTA, which she said was important to both countries and to the region. Hughes also pointed to recent international debt relief and the MCA as indicators of the bright economic future ahead for Honduras. A/S Shannon stressed the importance of the government remaining engaged with the private sector even after CAFTA is implemented, continuing to promote and guide the process.

Temporary Protected Status

16. (SBU) Noe Pino highlighted the importance of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program to Honduras, urging an early constructive dialogue on this issue. Noe Pino stated that the TPS program needed to be formalized. Hughes underscored President Bush's commitment to comprehensive immigration reform, embodied in the proposed temporary worker program. She stated that people in the U.S. should be living in the open and be able to visit their families in other countries. She indicated that the President would work very hard for immigration reform in order to provide foreign workers in the U.S. with dignity.

Counternarcotics

17. (C) Both during the meeting and on the margins, Noe Pino emphasized Zelaya's commitment to combating illegal narcotics. Noe Pino stressed that fighting narcotraffickers was a national security matter for both Honduras and the United States. In an aside, the DCM told Noe Pino and Valladares that Honduras needed to augment its military transport capability to reach remote areas infested with the narcotics trade rather than continue to maintain its expensive and ill-equipped fighter aircraft.

Comment

18. (C) U/S Hughes' visit provided a great opportunity for President-elect Zelaya to claim his new role as the next Chief of State. The meeting came as the electoral impasse over final election results dragged into its second week. The highly visible meeting - well covered by the media - moved the inevitable recognition of Zelaya's victory further along. In fact, National Party presidential candidate Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo conceded the election less than 24 hours later. The meeting was also a highly productive start to bilateral engagement as both sides found common interests and mutual good will in addressing economic, security, and social issues. Noe Pino conveyed to the Ambassador later the same evening Zelaya's elation over having met with a key senior American official - and close associate of President Bush. The Zelaya team, which has appeared skeptical in the past over the degree of U.S. support for their program, clearly benefited from the candid and warm exchange with the Hughes delegation. They also heard WHA A/S Shannon's clear message that the Ambassador speaks for the Secretary of State and the President in presenting U.S. foreign policy to Honduras. Zelaya and Hughes agreed that this is an opportune moment for bilateral relations with a new Honduran President and a new American Ambassador both ready to build on the relationship. Post is told that Zelaya plans to visit the U.S. in January before the January 27, 2006 inauguration and we look forward to constructing a schedule that will further cement our developing relations with Zelaya and his team. End Comment.
Ford